Approaching Religion Through Story

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A project of the Story and Religion Network at the University of Edinburgh

RME Teaching Resource Book 2016

Stories from Christian and Buddhist Traditions

Naomi Appleton and Alison Jack

with the support of
Martin Downes, Louise Hepburn and Robert O'Neill
and Education Scotland

All these resources and more are available to download from:

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources/

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Introduction

Stories are a fundamental part of human experience, to the extent that some people believe that it is our ability to tell and comprehend stories that sets us apart from other animals. All the religious traditions of the world use stories to communicate, explore and sometimes challenge their beliefs and practices. Stories draw you in to a new world – the storyworld – and leave you open to respond in an individual way, developing empathy and imagination. For these reasons and more, stories are an excellent tool for learning about religion.

This booklet contains stories from Christian and Buddhist traditions for use in schools. Introductory material is included to help give the teacher confidence and context for using the story. Suggested questions are provided to prompt reflection on the most suitable uses for the story. However, the resources will need to be adjusted as necessary to different levels and learners.

Stories are provided for each of the three organisers that structure the experiences and outcomes for RME: Beliefs; Values and Issues; and Practices and Traditions. Keywords indicate the particular focus of each story. However, these are again meant to be a starting point, not a prescription.

A separate document provides suggestions for classroom activities that make use of stories. We are grateful to our consultant teachers Louise Hepburn, Martin Downes and Robert O'Neill for compiling this document.

These resources can also be freely downloaded from:
http://www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources/
Additional resources will also be added to this website periodically, including those related to other religious traditions.

These resources have been created by Drs Naomi Appleton and Alison Jack, of the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, in collaboration with local schoolteachers, and supported by a University of Edinburgh Knowledge Exchange Grant.

If you have any feedback on these resources, or are willing to share your experiences of using them in the classroom, please contact us:
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Stories for exploring Beliefs

Stories from Christian traditions

Stories from Buddhist traditions

Stories for exploring Values and Issues

Stories from Christian traditions

Stories from Buddhist traditions

Stories for exploring Practices and Traditions

Stories from Christian traditions

Stories from Buddhist traditions

Stories by Keyword

*Activities for **Before** Exploring a Story*

Capturing Prior Knowledge

BEFORE STORY	First Level	Second Level	Third Level	Fourth Level
Activity Description	Select three or four main pieces of information (who, what, when, where etc.) from the story and ask learners to **draw** what you are describing. Share and **discuss** some of the images that are **most and least accurate** without revealing which they are. Revisit these images after sharing the story to discuss what learners know now and encourage them to choose one thing they'd **change** about their image.	Before sharing the story, each small group of learners is given one statement from the story and asked to **draw** a representation of the statement as they understand it. Share group images and **discuss** how they should be **sequenced** and then display in the correct order. As more of the narrative, and thereby context, is revealed, **discuss** how and why some of these images might need to be **modified** because of learners' new knowledge and understanding of the story.	**Deconstruct** a variety of fables, legends, myths, traditional tales and films by looking at story structures and character traits that are repeated, borrowed and modified time and again regardless of subject. *(E.g. protagonist/antagonist, Seven Basic Plots: overcoming the monster; rags to riches; the quest; voyage and return; comedy; tragedy; rebirth)* Study stories from world religions within these frameworks by **drawing parallels**, discovering **differences** and **connecting** prior knowledge and experiences.	Ask learners to **compose** a piece of fictional text which **demonstrates** a particular value/issue. After reading a selection of related narratives from world religions about the same value/issue, **compare** representations, content and **reflect** on deepened understanding of value/issue. Provide opportunities to **refine, clarify** and **add** to complexity of own text if appropriate.

Using Images

BEFORE STORY	First Level	Second Level	Third Level	Fourth Level
	Discuss what might be happening or being shown in the pictures. Ask learners to **describe** and **predict** the significance images might have for the story to come and help learners **explain** links with shared prior knowledge. Return to images frequently throughout the story.	**Discuss** what might be happening or being suggested by the imagery. Ask learners to **explain** how an image links with prior knowledge or stories about themes/ideas suggested by images. Gather **questions** and **commentary** about style, tradition, cultural and/or religious connections of illustrations/images.	**Discuss** what might be happening or being suggested by the imagery. Ask learners to **explain** how an image links with prior knowledge or stories about themes/ideas suggested by images. Gather **responses** that focus on identifying symbolic representations within the stylistic, cultural, traditional and religious context.	Ask learners to **identify** what they think might be the moral message, teaching point or lesson being communicated by the image and ask learners to **compose** their own text exploring this.

Taking a stance on currently held beliefs

BEFORE STORY	First Level	Second Level	Third Level	Fourth Level
	Take the 'temperature' or initial reaction to an action choice or moral dilemma faced by the central character by ask learners to cast a **vote** in some way (e.g. with coloured counters or sticky notes). Briefly explain the situation that the central character is going to find themselves in, learners then vote for the **choice** they believe they would make. (Repeat the voting activity again after examining the story to **evidence** and **analyse** any change in opinion from the whole group and, where appropriate, individuals.)	Take the 'temperature' or initial reaction to an ethical or moral dilemma featured in the story by involving learners in a' **Conscience Alley'**. Divide learners into two lines opposite one another. Pose a question about the choice a central character has to make and give two action **choices**. Learners on one side are asked to select a short **persuasive** phrase to support their argument and that they can repeat easily. Learners on the opposite side should do likewise for their allocated stance. Each learner takes his/her turn to process slowly down the centre of the aisle created by the two sides and **listen** to the comments made. When the moving learner reaches the bottom of the 'alley', he/she casts a **vote** to express his/her **opinion**. (After **examining** and **reflecting** on the story in depth, this activity can be repeated to **evidence** and **analyse** any change in opinion across the group or individually.)	Introduce the moral theme/dilemma explored in the story, and ask pupils to think of stories, events or personal experiences that **relate** to the theme. Invite learners to **describe** their responses to each other in pairs. Conduct a **class discussion** on the theme, inviting learners to give their initial view on the theme, with reasons. Ask learners to **listen and respond** to the responses they hear, encouraging them to continue the discussion (e.g. agree/disagree with a specific point and give a reason). *It may also be appropriate to make use of the 'Conscience Alley' (see Second Level) at this level.*	Introduce the moral theme/dilemma explored in the story, and have learners **research** this topic. Ask learners to find **two viewpoints** on the issue, and ask them to describe the two viewpoints with reasons. Then have learners **compare** the views by identifying similarities and differences. Finally, ask learners to pick one view that they agree with, give one reason why they agree, and one reason why they have rejected the alternative view. (Repeat the task after the story to identify any changes in opinion.)

*Activities for Exploring Dilemma Questions **During** a Story*

Activities suggested here should not be considered exclusively one specific level, but be modified and adapted to suit:

- *the age and stage of the learners,*
- *its relevance for extending breadth, depth and challenge,*
- *and the narrative and context of the story chosen for study.*

Activity	First Level	Second Level	Third Level	Fourth Level
JUNCTIONS	• Stop at **junctions** in the narrative to allow learners to **discuss and postulate** about what a central character 'should do' next i.e. the action **choice** he/she should make. • Enhance the depth of learning from and about religion by presenting different religious perspectives about the central dilemma choice to be **explored** and **reframed** through discussion by learners. *(For example, if the story was about the treatment of animals, then present short pieces of text or stories to demonstrate various religious perspectives about the correct treatment of animals and then discuss 'What might a Buddhist recommend as the action choice for the central character?' and 'What might Sikhism recommend…etc.)*			
JUDGEMENTS	• If the story selected for study ends in **judgement** of a character's actions, then it can be effective to withhold the ending of the story and allow groups of learners to **discuss, explore** and **present by dramatizing** (if appropriate to source religion) their **choice/prediction** of ending. • Learners should be expected to be able to **justify** why their chosen ending is appropriate and **explain** how it links to the story and its context. • Observing learners could be invited to **write or talk** about how appropriate and effective each group's ending is before revealing the actual ending of the story. *Further opportunity for discussion and/or written analysis and evaluation of developing beliefs can be sought at this time.*			
TABLE MATS	• Make use of **table mat techniques** *(Fox Thinking Tool/Wedge Tool etc.)* to **record** independent thought about questions posed by or associated with the story. • **Share** thoughts with group members and finally **identify, discuss and record** points of **convergence and divergence** within group. • Use table mats to stimulate discussion across class, identifying where that overall points of agreement/disagreement are.			
CO-OP Learning	• **Co-Op Learning** (2Stay & 2Stray) / **World Café Conversations** *(www.theworldcafe.com)* • Using the value/issue from one story, present differing religious perspectives at each table and rotate groups around room until **cross-pollination of ideas and opinions** has occurred and important details of discussion have been **recorded by writing or drawing** on the table mats. *Effective question prompts for on table mats include, 'What would (religion) recommend?' or 'What should (character) do?'*			

*Activities for Reflecting and Evaluating **After** a Story*

Activities suggested here should not be considered exclusively one specific level, but be modified and adapted to suit:

- *the age and stage of the learners,*
- *its relevance for extending breadth, depth and challenge,*
- *and the narrative and context of the story chosen for study.*

Activity	First Level	Second Level	Third Level	Fourth Level
COMIC STRIP	• Learners might be asked to **create** a **Comic Strip** of the story individually, but the purpose of the task must include a **reflective** element which goes beyond simple recall of narrative • Prompts like the following could be included in each box*:* ○ *At the beginning of this story I thought…* ○ *This part made me think…* ○ *Then I thought…* ○ *By the end I thought…*			
HOT-SEAT INTERVIEW	• Conduct a **Hot-Seat Interview** by compiling **questions** to ask when **interviewing** one character from the story *(not always the central character, could be an eye-witness or secondary character).* • Either the teacher or a learner then assumes that character and answers questions posed by fellow learners. *(A good grasp of contextual knowledge is required for being 'in-role' during this activity.)*			
REFLECTION RECORD	• Make time and space for each learner to keep a **Reflection Record** of their thoughts, learning and development of beliefs and values after exploring each story. • The format of such a record should include space to **record responses** to statement prompts such as: ○ *This story reminds me of…* ○ *This story has made me think about…* ○ *I would like to ask…* ○ *I want to think some more about…* ○ *I wonder…* ○ *I think (character) should…* ○ *This is good to know about because…* ○ *I was surprised…* ○ *I have changed my mind about…*			

CO-OP Learning	• **Co-Op Learning** (2Stay & 2Stray) / **World Café Conversations** *(www.theworldcafe.com)* • Using the value/issue from one story, present differing religious perspectives at each table and rotate groups around room until **cross-pollination of ideas and opinions** has occurred and important details of discussion have been **recorded by writing or drawing** on the table mats. *Effective question prompts for on table mats include, 'What would (religion) recommend?' or 'What should (character) do?'*
RETELLING (different context)	• Task learners with **Retelling** the story within a **different context** (*e.g. a modern day version or from a different character's perspective; even that of the perceived 'villain')* in order to draw out issues/values that would or would not transfer across boundaries of culture, religion and context.
DEBATE	• In a formal and structured way, **Debate** a theme, message or value presented in a story. • Ask groups of learners to prepare a final statement of defence of a character's actions or propose their recommendations for a character's actions.
LINKS with CURRENT AFFAIRS	• Encourage and provide appropriate resources and scaffolding as necessary to help learners identify links, make connections and/or draw parallels between the story selected for study and local or global **Current Affairs**.
ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS	• Use **Different Versions** *(publications, abridgements, translations, sources)* of the same story to explore, contrast and compare content, emphasis, bias and context.

Stories from Christian Traditions

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The Parables of Jesus
Setting the Scene- Notes for Teachers

Telling stories seems to have been a distinctive aspect of Jesus' teaching. There is a body of over 30 stories which the Gospel writers attribute to Jesus. Some of the stories appear in several of the Gospels, in slightly different forms. Some of them appear in only one of the Gospels: Luke's Gospel has more of these stories than the others, and often gathers them together into groups. Two of the most famous parables are to be found only in Luke's Gospel: the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the Prodigal Son. Luke's Jesus is a master storyteller.

In the Gospels, Jesus himself calls his stories "parables", and this is the term which we use today. Literally, the word means "thrown together"- indicating, perhaps, the way that ideas and concepts are involved alongside the stories themselves. The term was not a common one in the time of Jesus, and his adoption of it suggests that there was something distinctive about his storytelling. Unlike Aesop's Fables, which were well known at the time, Jesus' parables all involve human rather than animal characters, and they are set in the everyday world of their original hearers. The characters in the stories are landowners, farmers and shepherds; men and women; rich and poor; parents, children and older people. They face situations which are familiar, although the outcome is often surprising: things get lost and found; powerful people are persuaded to do unexpected things; the disadvantaged end up in privileged places. Often the stories are introduced with the explanation that "The kingdom of God is like this": and it is a place where those who think they are right turn out to be in the wrong; where tiny things make a big difference; and where common sense doesn't always prevail.

The first Christians clearly wanted to preserve this aspect of the teaching of Jesus, but they didn't try to copy him by spreading his message using parables they wrote themselves. Instead, they tried to interpret the stories Jesus told in ways which spoke to the new situations they found themselves in. In the early church, it became common to try to give a meaning to every aspect of the story. So, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the robbed man is identified with Adam, in need of salvation; the robbers are the hostile powers in the world; the Samaritan is Christ the saviour; the donkey on which the man is placed is Christ's body; the inn is the Church, accepting all those brought by Christ; and the innkeeper is Peter, the one Jesus identified as having a role to play in leading and feeding the members of the church. This is called an allegorical reading of the parables, and it was popular for many centuries. Perhaps it is still tempting to try to make everything in these stories have

a deeper meaning, because of their status in the Gospels- although we wouldn't try to do this with other stories.

This very rigid way of reading the parables has in recent times been challenged by those who see the stories as directly addressing the hearer, engaging their imaginations in ways that can't be fixed for all time. The response of the hearers will depend on where they see themselves in the story: in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, do they identify with the younger son, or the older stay-at-home son, or the father himself? On this view, the parables remain effective as stories across time.

Others have sought to situate the parables very firmly in the ministry of Jesus (or in the world of the editors/writers of the Gospels), and to try to work out what they must have meant in that historical context. Why did Jesus tell this story at this point in his ministry? Was it, in the case of the Prodigal Son, to judge the actions of the Pharisees he was encountering; or was it a story full of meaning for the early church as it worked out how to deal with followers who left the faith, perhaps because of persecution, but wanted to return? The role of the parables for these interpreters is primarily to tell us more about the world of Jesus and his followers, rather than to mean something new for modern readers.

In using these stories in the classroom, any or all of these approaches might be offered, each bringing something different to the discussion. The parables, like all good stories, stand up to a variety of interpretations, and uncovering the layers of meaning is all part of the joy and value of reading them.

Questions to bear in mind when reading any of these stories include: what do we need to know and what is it helpful to know about the historical background of the story? Does the original meaning of the story matter, or should a story mean something different to every hearer?

Sources / Further Reading for all parables

- Bible verses quoted are from the Good News Bible © 1994 published by the Bible Societies/HarperCollins Publishers Ltd UK, Good News Bible© American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992. Used with permission.
- Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Eerdmans, 2008)
- The on-line resources at NTGateway are useful: http://www.ntgateway.com/gospel-and-acts/general-resources/parables

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31)

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Christianity, beliefs, actions and their consequences, poverty and wealth, heaven and hell

Notes for teachers

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is distinctive among Jesus' parables as it is the only one in which a character is given a name: the poor man who sits at the rich man's gate is identified as Lazarus. This is a popular, informal form of the name Eleazer/Eliezer, who is identified as Abraham's servant in Genesis 15.2. Significantly, the Hebrew name means "God helps", although it is very probable that Luke's Greek-speaking readers would not have known this. Another Lazarus is mentioned in the New Testament, in John 11, as the man Jesus raises from the dead, but it's unlikely that there is any connection between that character and the parable.

It is also the only one of Jesus' stories which focuses on life after death, rather than life here and now. It works as a warning to its readers/hearers about the consequences of their behaviour, and might be compared to the Hebrew Bible story the prophet Nathan tells King David in 2 Samuel 12.1-13:

> The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to David. Nathan went to him and said, "There were two men who lived in the same town; one was rich and the other poor. The rich man had many cattle and sheep, while the poor man had only one lamb, which he had bought. He took care of it, and it grew up in his home with his children. He would feed it some of his own food, let it drink from his cup, and hold it in his lap. The lamb was like a daughter to him. One day a visitor arrived at the rich man's home. The rich man didn't want to kill one of his own animals to fix a meal for him; instead, he took the poor man's lamb and prepared a meal for his guest." David became very angry at the rich man and said, "I swear by the living Lord that the man who did this ought to die! For having done such a cruel thing, he must pay back four times as much as he took."
> "You are that man," Nathan said to David.

David had taken Bathsheba as his wife, and had arranged to have her husband Uriah killed. Through Nathan, David is confronted in the form of a story with the harsh reality of the effect his actions have had on others. David is then given an opportunity to recognize and make amends for what he has done. However, the warning comes too late for the rich man in the parable, and it does not look good for his brothers, who have had the teaching of the prophets but have chosen to ignore it. The reader is left to heed the warning or to follow the way of the rich man and his brothers.

Of course, it is clear in the story from 2 Samuel what David had done wrong. What the rich man had done to merit such punishment is much less clear in Jesus' parable. He does nothing actively to harm the poor man. His wrongdoing is left to the reader to infer: perhaps it was his simple disregard for the man who sat at his gate every day in desperate poverty which merits such eternal punishment. His concern for his brothers suggests that he recognized there was something he might have done differently, and he is keen to alert them to that possibility.

Several biblical texts suggest there was a view in Jesus's time that success in life was an indication of God's blessing, and poverty signaled that you were cursed by God. The comments of the disciples in John 9.1-2 on seeing a blind man ("Who sinned, the man or his parents, that he was born blind?"), imply that this was a common understanding. The Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible suggests the same.

However, Jesus' response to his disciples in John 9.3 ("His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins") suggests that this was not an understanding her promoted. Instead, he seemed to focus on what might be done to change the situation of individuals and marginalized groups. The notion of the reversal of fortunes is a common one particularly in Luke's Gospel, established clearly in the song Mary sings in praise of God at the conception of Jesus:

> He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands. (Luke 1.52-53)

We can also see parallels with Jesus' teaching about salvation in Luke 13.28-30:

> How you will cry and gnash your teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, while you are thrown out! People will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down at

the feast in the Kingdom of God. Then those who are now last will be first, and those who are now first will be last.

Here there is a gulf between those who are allowed into the company of Abraham and the prophets at a heavenly feast, and those who are barred from entering. Some of the first will be last and the last first in this heavenly world, asserts Luke's Jesus.

Understanding of the afterlife

In the parable, the Greek word "Hades" is used to describe the place where the rich man is taken after death, while Lazarus is described as being in a place of honour, with Abraham the great patriarch himself. Neither Hades, nor "Sheol", its Hebrew equivalent, is a common word in the Hebrew Bible or in the New Testament. Both words refer to the place where the dead go, although often this is little more than the grave itself. In some texts, both the righteous and the unrighteous go to Hades, which is a place of both reward and torment. However, the two places are kept firmly apart here, with the gap between them necessary for the interaction within the story. A contemporary, alternative word for a place of judgement after death is "Gehenna", a valley outside Jerusalem where children had been sacrificed (2 Kings 23.10) and which later became the place where rubbish was burned. There seems to have been a variety of ways in which Jews at the time of Jesus understood what would happen to people after they died, with different groups believing different things about whether or not souls continued to exist postmortem.

Whether this parable is referring to the final judgement of the souls of the rich man and Lazarus, or to an intermediate state, with final judgement still to come, is not clear. In terms of the story, what is important about the places the characters end up in is that there is no escape, even for reasons which sound merciful. Of course this is a story describing life after death, which by definition is beyond human experience on earth. In this it works as a folk-tale or myth, although it could also be read as indicating the divine insight of Jesus as storyteller.

Questions for Discussion

<u>Comprehension of the story</u>
Describe the way Lazarus lives. What happens to him when he dies?
Describe the way the rich man lives. What happens to him when he dies?
From whose perspective is the story told? And who is the main character in the story? Are they the same?

Some have called this the story of the six brothers- can you suggest reasons for this?

Application to other contexts

What did the rich man do wrong? What did Lazarus do right?
Is the story fair to both characters?
What does the story suggest about actions and their consequences?
The story talks about warning people about the consequences of their actions. Do people respond well to warnings about the right and wrong things to do? How do you respond to warnings like theses? What makes you more or less likely to listen to these warnings?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

Do you think this story describes Christian beliefs about the after life, or is it just trying to communicate a message? Why?
What other stories from Christianity deal with afterlife?

Sources / Further Reading

Harold G. Coward, *Life After Death in World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997)
John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell and Purgatory* (Oxford: OUP, 2009)

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

There was once a rich man who dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury every day. There was also a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who used to be brought to the rich man's door, hoping to eat the bits of food that fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven. The rich man died and was buried, and in Hades, where he was in great pain, he looked up and saw Abraham, far away, with Lazarus at his side. So he called out, 'Father Abraham! Take pity on me, and send Lazarus to dip his finger in some water and cool off my tongue, because I am in great pain in this fire!'

But Abraham said, 'Remember, my son, that in your lifetime you were given all the good things, while Lazarus got all the bad things. But now he is enjoying himself here, while you are in pain. Besides all that, there is a deep pit lying between us, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do so, nor can anyone cross over to us from where you are.'

The rich man said, 'Then I beg you, father Abraham, send Lazarus to my father's house, where I have five brothers. Let him go and warn them so that they, at least, will not come to this place of pain.' Abraham said, 'Your brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them; your brothers should listen to what they say.'

The rich man answered, 'That is not enough, father Abraham! But if someone were to rise from death and go to them, then they would turn from their sins.' But Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death.'

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Christianity, beliefs, forgiveness, repentance, family, being lost and being found, fairness

Notes for teachers

This very well-known parable which is often taken as presenting a clear set of beliefs about what God is like. Most Christian readings take the father in the story to represent God, who actively watches and waits for those who have turned away from him to return. When they do, his welcome is generous and full. The key phrases explaining the father's perspective are repeated: the younger son was lost and is found; he was dead and now he is alive. The "prodigal" in the title refers to the extravagant way the younger son wastes his inheritance in the far country; but it is also a good word to describe the almost carefree way the father chooses to welcome him home.

The structure of the parable is unusually complicated and extended compared to the other parables Jesus tells in the Gospel. In this, the parable of the Prodigal Son is most like one of the other famous parables to be found only in Luke's Gospel, the parable of the Good Samaritan. But we should note that in the story there are never more than two people or groups speaking to each other: the father never speaks to both sons at once, for example. It's a very similar structure to the one we find in fairy tales or folk tales.

A further unusual element here is the way we are given an indication of what the characters are thinking: we hear the younger son's thought processes as he "comes to his senses" and realizes how much better off he would be at home, even as a servant; we hear that the father is "filled with pity" when he sees his son on the road home; and we are told that the older son is "angry" because of the way his brother has been treated. Unlike many parables, these characters are fleshed out a little, and perhaps because of that readers have been drawn to the story and the way it is played out. Added to that, of course, is the very human picture it presents about the deep emotions involved in family life, in the time of Jesus as well as today.

Some of the issues to highlight about the story in its historical setting would include the destabilizing and shocking nature of the younger son's request for his share of his inheritance. It's as if he wishes his father were already dead. It would certainly disrupt the system of land ownership which would have been clung to in an agrarian society such as this. No wonder the older son is angry when the younger son returns, empty-handed: another mouth to feed from an already depleted resource. Some scholars have even suggested that the father has to make such a public display of reconciliation, and offer a feast for the neighbourhood, in order to protect his son from the anger of the villagers, who would not be happy to see such a rebellious character return.

In dealing with this story, modern readers might also want to ask why there are no female characters involved here. Would it be a different story if the children were girls and it was the mother who welcomed back her child? And such speculation, set free from consideration about what Jesus meant by telling the story, might prompt questions about why the younger son left in the first place. Some modern readers have speculated about how this story might be heard by those for whom family life is not a safe and welcoming environment. To a victim of abuse, for example, the return of the younger son to the family home might not read as such a positive development. The father's welcome might be heard as sinister rather than joyful, and the lack of response from both sons to the father's actions in the story might leave open a sense of unease.

The parable allows for such readings because of its open structure and power as a story. In terms of its context in the Gospel of Luke, its focus is clear. It is the third of three parables (the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin come first) which Jesus is presented as telling in response to the grumbling of Pharisees and teachers of the Law. These establishment figures are annoyed by the way "This man [Jesus] welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!" (Luke 15.1-2). Luke's Jesus seems to identify the Pharisees with the older brother, and the tax collectors and other undesirables with whom Jesus spends time are portrayed as those who are to be welcomed to the feast. The reader is invited to identify either with the younger son, far from God but promised a warm homecoming; or with the older son, and to be less judgmental and more welcoming. But this is only one way to read the story and Luke's interpretation should not close down the debate.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

What does the younger son do in the story?
Describe the reactions of the father and the older brother when the younger son returns.
Is there a difference between what we are told about the younger son when he leaves home, and what the older brother says about the way he behaved?

Application to other contexts

What does "home" mean to each of these characters? What does it mean to you?
When is it right to leave home; when is it right to stay? Is it always a good idea to return home, especially when you are in trouble?
Are the father's actions fair to everyone?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

According to this story, what do you think is important to Jesus?
For Christians, what does this story teach them about what God is like?
Does the younger son deserve to be welcomed back? Does this matter? Are there other stories Jesus told, or which are told about him, in which surprising, even shocking, things happen?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son
(Luke 15.11-32)

Jesus went on to say, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger one said to him, 'Father, give me my share of the property now.' So the man divided his property between his two sons. After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. At last he came to his senses and said, 'All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! I will get up and go to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers."' So he got up and started back to his father.

"He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. 'Father,' the son said, 'I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.' But the father called to his servants. 'Hurry!' he said. 'Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.' And so the feasting began.

"In the meantime the older son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard the music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him, 'What's going on?' 'Your brother has come back home,' the servant answered, 'and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound.' The older brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. But he spoke back to his father, 'Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!' 'My son,' the father answered, 'you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.'"

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager
(Luke 16:1-8)

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Christianity, values and issues, honesty vs dishonesty, morality, debt, generosity

Notes for teachers

In this story about a dishonest manager is far from easy to categorise exactly who is the hero and who is the villain. Often, readers of Jesus' parables are tempted to identify characters with God, or the disciples, or Jesus himself. Here, is God to be associated with the rich boss, calling his follower, the manager, to account? Is the manager, all in a panic, really to be identified with faithful disciples? Debts are sometimes used in the parables to represent sin, but that does not seem to work here, as the manager fiddles the accounts in the debtors' favour, hoping to curry their support in the future. Most strangely of all, the master applauds him for defrauding him and it seems that the threat of dismissal has been forgotten. The manager's quick-thinking seems to have saved the day in a most surprising way.

This is certainly a story in which the unexpected happens, but generosity of a sort is a key theme here. Those with power act in a way that seems unjust- perhaps to modern readers as much as to those who heard the story in its original context. But the powerful are the only losers here in the end.

Some background information might help us to read the story with greater understanding.

There is a theory that at the time of Jesus it was common for a manager to exploit those he managed by demanding a proportion of their profits, either in money or in goods, as his commission. The manager in the story, under pressure, does not charge those beneath him that proportion, in order to gain their trust. And when the master finds out, he is forced to commend him for acting justly. Knowing something of the way business was conducted at the time of Jesus perhaps helps us to understand what the story might have meant to its first hearers.

The immediate context of the story might also be significant. If we compare the shape of the parable of the Prodigal Son, which comes just before this one in Luke's

Gospel (Luke 15), we will see some similarities: both start with "A certain man"; both start and finish with speeches from the opening character; both involve characters who squander what they have and get themselves into life-threatening situations; both end with the authority figure accepting the son/manager back. Perhaps in both stories the emphasis is on the father/master and his willingness to welcome the disgraced one back.

The writer of Luke's Gospel struggles to make sense of this parable as much as we do- in verses 9-12, he keeps adding to the parable, trying to explain it. Perhaps in Luke's attempt to see in the parable something about the importance of relationships over money there is something we can all relate to, although it remains a puzzling and strange story!

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
Why is the manager in danger of losing his job?
What does he do to prepare for this and why?
How does the master react and why?
What words would you use to describe the manager's character?
What is surprising about this story as it is told by Jesus?

Application to other contexts
Is it always right to be generous?
Are there other ways the story might have ended?
What difference has it made when someone has been generous to you in some way?
Are there examples of times when being generous has had a cost, to you or to others?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues
What does parable suggest about how people should treat one another?
What does this parable teach about the relationship Christians have with God?
What does this parable teach about the way you should approach challenging situations, including those involving money?

The Dishonest Manager
Luke 16.1-8

Jesus said to his disciples, “There was once a rich man who had a servant who managed his property. The rich man was told that the manager was wasting his master's money, so he called him in and said, ‘What is this I hear about you? Turn in a complete account of your handling of my property, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ The servant said to himself, ‘My master is going to dismiss me from my job. What shall I do? I am not strong enough to dig ditches, and I am ashamed to beg. Now I know what I will do! Then when my job is gone, I shall have friends who will welcome me in their homes.’

So he called in all the people who were in debt to his master. He asked the first one, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ‘One hundred barrels of olive oil,’ he answered. ‘Here is your account,’ the manager told him; ‘sit down and write fifty.’ Then he asked another one, ‘And you—how much do you owe?’ ‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he answered. ‘Here is your account,’ the manager told him; ‘write eight hundred.’

As a result the master of this dishonest manager praised him for doing such a shrewd thing; because the people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the light.”

The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard
(Matthew 20:1-16)

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Christianity, values and issues, generosity, morality, reward

Notes for teachers

As in the parable of the dishonest manager, generosity towards unexpected recipients is a key theme in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. In this parable, it is tempting to identify the landowner with God. An allegorical reading might encourage us to see the daily wage offered by the landowner as representing eternal life, or salvation more generally. The identity of the workers is more open to interpretation.

Certainly the scene described would be familiar to Jesus' hearers in and around Galilee. Here, labour was cheap and employment was precarious. From the beginning of the day, those available to work would wait to be hired by those needing labourers, and the strongest would naturally be picked first. In the story, there is some negotiation about what these first will be paid, and then they are put to work, gathering in the harvest of grapes. The last ones to be picked are likely to be the weakest, the disabled perhaps, maybe those who are from a minority ethnic group and most likely to be marginalised. By five o'clock, those who are left will have given up hope of being chosen. Perhaps they have nowhere else to go.

A denarius (the "silver coin" in the translation used here) is assumed to be a standard pay for the 12 hour day of a labourer. The story is set up so that those who have worked the full day can clearly see the latecomers receive the same amount they, those chosen first, negotiated. These latecomers are given the same pay, for less work. Those who worked all day are rebuked for complaining about this, and for assuming they will be paid more. Many readers have understandably felt that there are obvious elements of unfairness in the story, and to have sympathy with the workers who were hired first.

The story might have been told to justify the economy of salvation understood by the early church, and apparently practised by the Jesus of the Gospels. Those who have a longstanding relationship with God are not to be jealous or annoyed when

those who have been engaged much later in the day are given the same reward, especially when they are the weak and the marginalised. God's generosity goes beyond human notions of fairness.

A further reading of the story involves taking it in its context in the early church, rather than in the ministry of Jesus. The vineyard was often used in the Hebrew Bible as a symbol of Israel (see Isaiah 5.7- "Israel is the vineyard of the LORD Almighty; the people of Judah are the vines he planted"). For some readers of this text, the vineyard is used in the story to suggest that Jewish and non-Jewish (or Gentile) followers of Jesus are all to be considered as God's chosen people. The story addresses any awkwardness or even hostility there might well have been between those who were followers of Jesus from the Jewish tradition, and those who have come to faith more recently, from the Gentile, non-Jewish world.

An overlooked element of the story is the way the master acts, reaching out and calling to others before they come to him. He initiates the contact, and the workers respond. Bargaining with him is not what is at the heart of this story. Rather, the master's actions are marked by radical generosity, particularly to those who others consider to be the last and the least. This might be read as a very powerful picture from the Christian tradition of the way it is understood that God deals with all people.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
What did the man who owned the vineyard do in the story?
Why were the workers who were hired first annoyed with the man who hired them? How did he justify his actions?
How might those who were hired last feel when they received their pay?

Application to other contexts
What information might be useful to know about the time in which this story was first told?
Is there a difference between being generous and being fair? Is it possible to be both generous and fair? How does the story answer these questions?
What are some of the reasons why people don't have jobs today? How do issues of generosity and fairness apply to unemployed people in our society?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

This story suggests that ‘the first are placed last, and the last are placed first.’ What other stories from Christianity deal with this message?
For Christians, what does this story teach about how they should live their lives?

The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard
(Matthew 20:1-16)

The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. He went out again to the marketplace at nine o'clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, so he told them, 'You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage.' So they went. Then at twelve o'clock and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. It was nearly five o'clock when he went to the marketplace and saw some other men still standing there. 'Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?' he asked them. 'No one hired us,' they answered. 'Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard,' he told them.

When evening came, the owner told his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.' The men who had begun to work at five o'clock were paid a silver coin each. So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. They took their money and started grumbling against the employer. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'while we put up with a whole day's work in the hot sun—yet you paid them the same as you paid us!' 'Listen, friend,' the owner answered one of them, 'I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day's work for one silver coin. Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?'"

And Jesus concluded, "So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last."

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector
(Luke 18.9-14)

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Christianity, practices and traditions, values and issues, prayer, hypocrisy, appearance vs reality, repentance, true godliness

Notes for teachers

Here is a story about a human situation we can all relate to. Most of us can recognise when someone acts as if they think they are more important than others; and when someone acts as if they don't think they are very important at all. Perhaps we have all acted in, or at least felt, the same way as both of these characters at different times. Jesus's story is firmly set in the world of his time, both in terms of place and in terms of attitudes to people belonging to specific, identifiable groups. Knowing something about how his hearers would have reacted to these groups helps us to recover something of the unexpected about this story. Something about appearances and reality which we perhaps miss if we have different expectations about Pharisees and tax collectors (or no expectations at all).

Who were the Pharisees?

Pharisees were a group of Jews who were well respected at the time of Jesus for the way they tried to live strictly according to the Law. Their concerns were not overtly political but rather they sought to preserve and live out the religious duties represented in the Law. To read more about the aims of this group, Deuteronomy 26 (especially verses 16-19) offers a helpful picture: commitment to God is indicated by choosing to give a tenth of your crops to the temple, caring for the needs of the poor, and keeping all the laws God has handed down. The choice to live this way is part of the covenant, or promised relationship, between God and his people. It is a response to the blessings God has given and will give to those who demonstrate their commitment to him.

Luke's Gospel was written late in the first century for followers of Jesus who were most likely far from Jerusalem and the temple (and indeed, the temple had most likely been destroyed by the Romans by the time Luke was writing). In this Gospel, the Pharisees are presented in a rather different and distinct way. Often they are

shown to be unreceptive towards Jesus and his message, grumbling about what he has to say and unwilling to accept him in the way that others do. Stories such as the healing of the paralysed man in Luke 5.17-26 and the calling of the tax-collector Levi in Luke 5. 27-32 make this clear. But we should notice that they are also presented as trying to help Jesus in Luke 13.31.

So, in terms of the story of Luke's Gospel, readers might be justified in being suspicious of the Pharisee in this parable. The way his long speech makes him seem perfect, compared to those around him, places him in the context of most other references in Luke's Gospel. But if this story represents something about the actual time of Jesus, those hearing it for the first time would likely be nodding their heads in approval at the way the Pharisee fasts conscientiously and tithes with gusto, choosing not to act in a way which went against God's laws. He is not so much a caricature, as a man who takes his faith very seriously.

Who were the tax collectors?

As this story indicates, tax collectors in the time of Jesus were Jewish people who had chosen to work with and for the Romans, who controlled the economic and political life of the nation. The Romans demanded tax on just about everything: land, crops, income, travel. They needed people on the ground to collect this money, and looked to local people to enforce their laws. It is quite possible that a tax collector such as the man in the story received no pay for his work, apart from the extra he could charge the people he was detailed to exact the taxes from.

Jesus' first hearers would not have been cheering for the tax collector. He worked for the faceless occupying force, and would have been considered not only to be a traitor, but a cheat too, getting rich at the expense of his own people.

In Luke's Gospel, however, tax collectors are given a special mention in several places. They seem to have been a group Jesus actively sought out to interact with, even eat and stay with. We saw this in the story of the calling of Levi in Luke 5.27-32. We see it in the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus-19.1-10. In this Gospel, tax collectors are presented as ready to listen to Jesus, and open their lives and their homes to him. They find salvation while others are not singled out for such special treatment.

So, in this story, there are several levels of meaning we might want to consider. The understanding that Jesus' first hearers might have brought to the parable; the way

the reader of Luke would approach the story; and our own experiences, both of feeling important and superior AND of feeling small and insignificant.

Of course, Jesus was not the only person to tell stories about this contrast. In one of Aesop's Fables there is a story about a man who prays, "Lord God, look thou with favour upon me and my wife and children and upon no-one else". Another man overhears and prays, "Lord God, Almighty God, confound that fellow and his wife and his children and nobody else".

What is different in Jesus' parable is that, at least to his first hearers, there is a surprise ending which we don't get in Aesop's Fable. It turns out the story is about an individual's relationship with God, at least in Jesus' interpretation of it as storyteller. And the person who has the better relationship with God is the one you would least expect. Not the person who apparently does his best to keep God's laws and live an acceptable life. Rather, it is the one who has made choices which suggest he does not always put God and his people first, but is willing to admit his mistakes. The story plays with appearance and a deeper reality, available through the perspective of the hero of Gospel, Jesus the storyteller.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
Why did Jesus tell this story?
What does the Pharisee do and say which gets him into trouble with Jesus?
What does the tax collector do (or not do) which Jesus seems to approve of?
The tax collector obeys some aspects of the religious law, but are there other laws in the Bible which he does not seem to follow?
What might it mean to be in the right with God?

Application to other contexts
Is it always right to be humble?
Is it never right to judge others?
Have there been times when you felt you were right and someone else was wrong, and you wanted to make sure the other person knew it? Or when you felt that your views didn't matter, or you held back because you were worried about getting things wrong? How did you resolve the situation?
If you were retelling this story to your friends, what would you change and what would you keep the same so they got something of the original message? How would you keep a sense of surprise, which Jesus' telling of the story involved?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

What does this story tell us about the way Jesus and his followers thought about their relationship with God? And about prayer?

How might this story affect the behaviour and attitudes of people today who are Christians?

Does the story have a more universal message, with something to say to people of other faiths or none?

Sources / Further Reading

The Aesop's Fable is found in Babrius, Phaedrus, *Fables*, (translated by Ben Edwin Perry; Loeb Classical Library 436. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), no. 666 in Perry's appendix, p 575.

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector
(Luke 18:9-14)

Jesus also told this parable to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else.

"Once there were two men who went up to the Temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, 'I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, 'God, have pity on me, a sinner!'"

"I tell you," said Jesus, "the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great."

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Christianity, practices and traditions, sacred meals, salvation, invitation, discipleship

Notes for teachers

There seem to be two versions of this story in the New Testament: this one in Luke's Gospel and the other in Matthew's Gospel (22.1-13). There are significant differences between them, however, and it has been written of Matthew's version that it is "enough to make any interpreter go weak in the knees",[1] and so we will focus on Luke's slightly more straightforward telling of the story.

In Luke's Gospel, eating together is a common theme. Jesus invites surprising people to eat with him (such as Zacchaeus the tax collector in 19.10), and he uses meal times to teach those who are sitting at the table with him, as he does earlier in chapter 14 when he heals the man with the disease in his limbs.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus's final meal with his followers before he was crucified, often called the Last Supper, is hugely important. For Luke's version of events, see 22.7-23. Jesus identifies the wine and the bread of the Passover meal with his blood and his body, and tells his followers to remember him when they share the bread and wine together. This tradition itself looks back to the places in the Hebrew Bible where God promises to prepare a banquet for all people: "Here on Mount Zion the Lord Almighty will prepare a banquet for all the nations of the world—a banquet of the richest food and the finest wine" (Isaiah 25.6- and see Luke's echoing of this promise in the chapter before the parable- 13.28-30). The Last Supper anticipates the heavenly banquet promised by God, and many readers have associated the banquet in this parable with these similarly significant meals: the meal is ready and awaiting the response of those invited.

In Roman society too, banquets had great significance. Often laid on by the wealthy, they were ways in which status was affirmed or denied and society was organised. The invitations would be sent out to those people the host wanted to impress, and the seating plan would be carefully constructed so that everyone knew their place.

[1] Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 299.

A meal such as this would be filled with expectation and importance.

Given the importance of such a meal, it is all the more surprising that the first set of people who are invited find excuses not to come. They provoke the anger of the host, who extends the invitation to those least likely to have been on the original invitation list of those seeking social enhancement - the poverty stricken and the disabled. When it becomes clear that there is still room at the table, the servant is told to scour the highways to gather people in, as the master wants a full house.

As with all of Jesus' parables, the meaning changes depending on whose perspective we choose to take as readers. An obvious way to read the story is to identify the host with God or with Jesus, who has prepared everything for a heavenly banquet in his presence and has extended an invitation to many. But the invitation to discipleship is rejected because other, worldly activities are too pressing. There are close parallels here with Jesus' teaching on discipleship in Luke 9. 57-62, where going back to bury the dead or even say farewell to family members is not allowed.

An alternative reading is one which sees in this story a message about the Church's mission to the Gentiles, to whom an invitation into God's presence is extended because Jesus' message has been rejected by those originally invited, the Jewish people. Such a reading has been popular at times in the history of the Church, although the context in which the story is set does not support it.

However, if the parable is read not from the perspective of the guests, but from the changing point of view of the host, a different meaning might be arrived at. When the host's plans for a socially acceptable dinner are snubbed, it could be suggested that he has a change of heart and rejects the system of which he had been a part. He shifts his attention away from those who might have advanced his social standing to those who are in need. From this perspective, the story might sit well in the context of the community to which Luke was writing. If wealthier Christians were snubbing those in the church who were less well-off, perhaps because of disability, this parable might have been told to convince them to change their ways. Jesus' teaching immediately before the parable (verses 12-14) has made this point very clearly.

Like the parable of the Prodigal Son which appears in the next chapter, the importance of the image of the banquet or party as a place of resolution, community and, for some readers at least, acceptance by God, is an element in the story not to be overlooked.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Describe what happens when the host sends out his invitations.
What is the role of the servant in the story?
How convincing are the excuses the first people to be invited make? How would you feel if you were the host?
Why does the host want people to come to his dinner?

Application to other contexts

In many religious traditions, having a meal with other believers is important. Why might that be?
What does the story teach us about the way society was structured at the time of Jesus? Do you think society is still like this today? Why and in what ways?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

What other stories about Jesus eating with people have you heard? Does the story of Jesus' last meal with his followers have any connections with this story?
For Christians, what does this story teach them about what it means to be a follower of Jesus?
If the host in this story is supposed to represent God, what is God like?

The Parable of the Great Feast
(Luke 14.15-24)

When one of the guests sitting at the table heard this, he said to Jesus, "How happy are those who will sit down at the feast in the Kingdom of God!"

Jesus said to him, "There was once a man who was giving a great feast to which he invited many people. When it was time for the feast, he sent his servant to tell his guests, 'Come, everything is ready!'

But they all began, one after another, to make excuses. The first one told the servant, 'I have bought a field and must go and look at it; please accept my apologies.' Another one said, 'I have bought five pairs of oxen and am on my way to try them out; please accept my apologies.' Another one said, 'I have just gotten married, and for that reason I cannot come.'

The servant went back and told all this to his master. The master was furious and said to his servant, 'Hurry out to the streets and alleys of the town, and bring back the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.'

Soon the servant said, 'Your order has been carried out, sir, but there is room for more.' So the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the country roads and lanes and make people come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you all that none of those who were invited will taste my dinner!'"

Stories from Buddhist Traditions

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Introduction to Jataka Stories

What is a *Jātaka* story?

Simply defined, a *jātaka* story relates an episode in a past life of the Buddha.

Usually it is the Buddha who narrates the story of his past life, in order to explain something about a situation or character that he or his followers have encountered.

There is always a character in the story who is identified as the Buddha-to-be. This is often (but not always) the hero.

Many stories illustrate general Buddhist moral ideals, including honesty, wisdom, kindness, generosity and detachment.

In this jātaka carved into a stone railing at the Indian site of Bharhut in around the 1st century BCE, the Buddha-to-be is a monkey who saves his troop from the humans by making his body into a bridge to safety, demonstrating his leadership skills, compassion and selflessness. ➔

Because they are understood to have been told by the Buddha, *jātaka* stories show us how Buddhists view the Buddha as having great insight and memory of his past lives. Memory of past lives is viewed as something that is made possible by intense meditation.

As well as being a great visionary, the Buddha is presented as the best possible storyteller. Many stories have parallels in other story collections both within and outside India (including the Bible and Aesop's fables), and one aim of the genre seems to have been to declare that the Buddha was a source of all known stories, and the hero of most of them too!

The Buddha is also shown as being able to choose the best story to explain any puzzling situation. For example, he might tell a story of a past life in order to demonstrate the workings of karma, such that an action in the past results in an experience of the present. For example the Buddha's honouring of holy men in his past lives led to him being honoured in his final life. Other stories are told to show how ingrained characters can be, for example lots of stories tell of the multi-life rivalry between the Buddha and his cousin, who tried to kill the Buddha in many lifetimes, including his last.

The stories as a whole are often understood as showing how the Buddha became Buddha ('Awakened One'), by practising lots of virtues and qualities throughout numerous past lives. Lists of these virtues (usually called "perfections") were compiled over time, and stories were then often read as demonstrating one or more of them. The long path to buddhahood is known as the *bodhisatta* or *bodhisattva* path.

← *In this, the famous story of Vessantara, the Buddha-to-be gives away his wife and children in the perfection of his generosity (a key Buddhist ideal). The story is very popular, and is ritually re-enacted and recited at regular Buddhist festivals. Here it is illustrated in a Thai temple, Wat No.*

Some stories are *exemplary*, and followers are encouraged to try to behave like the Buddha. Others demonstrate the Buddha's amazing greatness, even in past lives, so as to inspire *admiration* and *awe*.

In this temple, Wat Khrua Wan in Bangkok, all the jātaka stories are illustrated in panels on the walls. They form part of the sacred biography of the Buddha, and demonstrate the great lengths he went to in order to achieve buddhahood.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism the idea developed that *all* Buddhists needed to become *bodhisattva*s and strive for buddhahood over multiple lives. *Jātakas* then took on a new meaning as maps of the path to buddhahood. Stories of self-sacrifice or bodily gift-giving became particularly popular in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Jātaka stories are still used in sermons and religious teachings. They are also illustrated throughout the Buddhist world, in temples and shrines. They play an important role in Buddhist festivals (e.g. Vesak) and rituals. They are also a valued part of the literary and cultural heritage of Buddhist countries, particularly Southeast Asia, where, for example, they have been staged as operas or retold in various poetic forms.

Jātaka resources

NB The main *jātaka* collection contains around 550 stories in the Pāli language, and was composed/compiled between the time of the Buddha (5th century BCE) and the time its commentary was fixed (5th century CE).
A full translation in turgid Victorian prose and absurd rhyming couplets is widely available online – search for E.B. Cowell's *The Jataka*. You can always make your own summaries from these!

Better translations include:

- Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Jātakas* (Penguin Classics, 2006)
- Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha* (Silkworm Press, 2015)
- Peter Khoroche (trans.) *Once the Buddha was a Monkey* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) is a very accessible translation of a short Sanskrit *jātaka* text, containing 34 of the best *jātaka* stories from early India.
- Ken and Visakha Kawasaki, *Jātaka Tales of the Buddha* (Buddhist Publication Society, 2009). See also www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/kawasaki/
- Other retellings here: www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/index.htm though without the Buddhist framing and with a simplistic moral summary.
- Clear Vision (http://www.clear-vision.org/Home/Home.aspx) also have cartoons and books for sale, especially good for younger children.
- And there are *loads* of printed books too, most notably the cartoon versions in the Amar Chitra Katha series from India.

When choosing versions of the stories to use, think about whether or not the story has the Buddhist framing (Is it told by the Buddha? Is it about the Buddha's past lives?) and whether there is sufficient openness about the 'meaning' of the story.

A really good secondary source for background to the *jātaka*s is John Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001). This is a general introduction to the Buddha's lifestory, but with a whole chapter on past lives.
There is also a good chapter on *jātaka*s in Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

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Kisagotami and the Mustard Seed

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Beliefs: impermanence, suffering

Notes for teachers

This famous story tells of a bereaved mother's despair and how this is transformed by an encounter with the Buddha. The mother, a woman called Kisagotami, cannot accept the reality of having lost her young son. Instead of simply *telling* her the truth, the Buddha allows her to discover it herself, and this process of discovery is in some way curative.

The story teaches the inevitability of death, which is a part of the central Buddhist belief in **impermanence**. The Buddha taught that everything is impermanent, nothing stays the same, because everything is part of an endless causal chain. This impermanence is the main reason for another difficult aspect of our experience: **suffering** (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*; Pali: *dukkha*). These two features (suffering and impermanence) along with the lack of an essential soul or self, make up the **three marks of existence**, a key set of Buddhist concepts. All existence within the cycle of rebirth and redeath is characterised by these three marks.

According to Buddhist teachings, the suffering of existence can be allayed in part by accepting the impermanence that characterises our lives. In other words, it is not the constant change itself that is the problem, but our desire to keep things the same, to hang on to the people and pleasures around us now.

The story also tells us about how the Buddha was viewed as a teacher. Instead of teaching by preaching, he has a clever ruse to enable poor Kisagotami to learn through her own experiences. This eventually results in her overcoming her grief and becoming a Buddhist nun. She is later said to achieve nirvana, the only escape from suffering and impermanence available.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
Why can't Kisagotami understand that her son is dead?
Why doesn't the Buddha just tell Kisagotami that everyone dies, rather than sending her off on the impossible mission?
What does Kisagotami learn as she goes house to house seeking a mustard seed?
What effect does Kisagotami's lesson have on her?
What does she achieve as a result?

Application to other contexts
What are the advantages of learning from experience rather than from being told something?
Can you think of an example of something important you have learnt by discovering it yourself?
Why is it important to be able to accept the death of loved ones?
Is there anything that can make it easier?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues
What do Buddhists believe about impermanence, and how does this story demonstrate this?
What do Buddhists believe about suffering, and how does this story demonstrate this?
What does the story tell us about the relationship between these two beliefs?
What do we learn about the Buddha as a teacher?
How does he choose to teach his followers?
What is the significance of Kisagotami eventually achieving nirvana?

Sources / Further Reading

This story is retold according to the Pali commentarial traditions surrounding the verses of the elder nuns. On the transformative power of maternal grief see Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism* (OUP 2012), chapter 2. There are lots of youtube videos of various Buddhist teachers talking about impermanence and death, as well as other helpful conversation starters, for example a short meditative film here https://youtu.be/u5d8NnvZvHU or Hugh Laurie singing a blues song here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1gVpmIy6TE

Kisagotami and the Mustard Seed

Once upon a time there was a young woman called Kisagotami. She married and had a son, a lovely little boy. Disease struck the village, and the young child got sick and died. Kisagotami was distraught, and could not accept what had happened. She carried her child from house to house asking for medicine to cure her little boy. Time after time the people tried to tell her the child was dead, but she would not believe them.

Eventually a kindly villager told her, "I can't give you medicine, but I know a man who can. Go and visit the Buddha in his monastery." Kisagotami followed his directions and approached the Buddha.

"Please give me medicine to cure my son!" she entreated the Buddha. The Buddha replied, "I can cure your son if you can fetch me a mustard seed." "Of course!" responded Kisagotami, delighted by how simple this requirement was. "One thing, though," added the Buddha, "the mustard seed must come from a house in which nobody has ever died."

So off Kisagotami went again, knocking on the doors of the village, asking for a mustard seed. Everyone could spare her a seed, but when she asked if anyone had died in the household, the reply every time was: "Yes, of course."

After a while, the truth began to dawn on Kisagotami. Death was everywhere. Everyone had lost somebody they loved. She was selfish to think she was special, or that her child could be spared.

At last Kisagotami was able to accept that her child had died. She had a funeral performed, then returned to the monastery, where she thanked the Buddha for his teaching, and asked to become a nun. She was ordained and became one of the most high achieving nuns in the Buddha's community. After diligent practice, Kisagotami achieved nirvana, and was thereby freed from the cycle of death and rebirth.

The Fatalist King and the Divine Sage

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Beliefs: karma and rebirth

Notes for teachers

Buddhist teachings take for granted the idea that we are all trapped in a beginningless cycle of rebirth and redeath (called *saṃsāra* in Sanskrit and Pali). The cycle can involve birth as a human, animal, god, hell-being or ghost. Whether we end up in a good rebirth or a bad one depends on *karma / kamma* – the actions we do. An action is good if it is motivated by good intentions or mental states such as generosity, non-attachment, compassion and wisdom. That it is a good action is affirmed by its karmic fruits, both in this life (for example being healthy and successful) and in future lives (for example in being born in a heaven or as a high-status human). Karmic fruiting operates as an impersonal force – there is no god in charge of handing out rewards and punishments.

Because karmic laws encourage people to behave well, any teachings that threaten this idea threaten the foundations of good society. In this story we see that principle in action: a king is persuaded by the teaching that there are no consequences to our actions, and as a result he starts misbehaving. Only a lengthy teaching from his daughter, and the interventions of a divine sage (identified as the Buddha in a past life), can save him from the terrible consequences of his bad karma.

As well as reinforcing the truth of karma and rebirth, this story helps us explore the different realms of rebirth. While the princess recalls past lives as humans and animals, the divine sage also teaches the king about the horrors of the hell realms. All of these possible realms of rebirth are ultimately temporary, but nonetheless Buddhists wish to ensure a good rebirth and avoid the torments of hells.

We also see some specific results of specific acts, in particular the idea that female birth and birth as a castrated animal result from having been a man who pursued other men's wives. This must have been a deterrent for male audiences, but is obviously problematic for a modern egalitarian audience!

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
What does the naked ascetic teach?
Why does the king enjoy the teaching?
How is the teaching supported by the (incomplete) past-life memories of the two bystanders?
Why is Princess Ruja worried about her father?
What arguments does she use to try to persuade him he is wrong?
What do we learn about her past lives and the way that karma works?
Why is the princess unsuccessful in changing her father's views?
How does the divine sage manage to finally persuade the king?

Application to other contexts
Why is it important to believe that actions have consequences?
If you thought there were no consequences to what you did, how would you behave?
Setting aside the idea that actions affect a person's rebirth, what other consequences do actions have that might encourage someone to behave well?
Does desire for heaven and fear of hell motivate actions in other religions too?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues
What does this story teach us about karma and the different realms of rebirth?
Why is a fatalist teaching so dangerous?
What do we learn about the karmic consequences of pursuing the wives of other men? What do we learn about the karmic causes of female birth? What does this tell us about early Buddhist attitudes towards women?
Why is it that memory of past lives can cause problems but can also make for a helpful teaching?

Sources / Further Reading

This version is summarised from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 544. A full translation, as well as useful introductory material, can be found in Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw (trans.) *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha* (Silkworm, 2015) and an older translation can be found here: http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j6/j6010.htm

The Fatalist King and the Divine Sage

Long ago there was a virtuous king, who ruled his kingdom well. During a festival he stood on his terrace with his ministers admiring the full moon. "What should we do on this fine evening?" he asked. "Let us visit a religious teacher!" replied one of his ministers. The king approved, and off they went to pay their respects to a famous naked ascetic[2] who was living in a park outside the city.

The king greeted the ascetic and asked for a teaching. The ascetic replied: "Great king, listen to my true and correct path! There is no fruit, good or bad, in righteous conduct. There are no other realms, for who has ever come back from them to tell us? Beings are all equal, and all are equally fated to their destiny, so there is no point in exertion or effort. There is no reward for generosity, and no need for revering our teachers or elders. All beings are gradually purified during 84,000 great aeons, reborn multiple times. Nobody can achieve liberation before this time, and whatever we do we cannot hasten the process."

One of the king's ministers spoke up: "I approve of this teaching. I am sure there is no fruiting of actions, for in a past life I was a cruel butcher, yet here I am reborn as a rich minister." Another bystander also spoke of his experiences: "I see now that there is no reward for good action, for in a past life I was a noble and virtuous man, yet here I have been reborn as a lowly slave. Well, I shan't bother being good anymore!"

The king too was delighted with this teaching. "All this time I have wasted trying to do the right thing, honouring holy men and administering justice, having no fun meanwhile. You have shown me a better way. Now even listening to your teachings will not prevent my pleasure. I will take my leave."

And so the king, believing that moral action is pointless, appointed his ministers to look after the kingdom and began to spend all his time with women, even with the wives of other men.

The king had a single daughter, named Ruja, who was very virtuous, and when she heard what had happened she was upset. On the next holy day (the day of the full or

[2] In India at the time of the Buddha there were lots of rival teachers, most of whom practised some form of asceticism (bodily austerities, such as fasting or living in the wilderness) and some of whom abandoned clothes.

new moon) Princess Ruja visited her father, as was normal, to ask for money in order to give alms. The king replied: "You have wasted enough money in this way! You ought to just eat the food and drink yourself, as there is no merit in denying yourself or giving gifts." He told her about the teaching he had received from the naked ascetic, and the stories of two bystanders that had supported the teaching.

Princess Ruja was unimpressed: "Your majesty, you are wise! Yet I see now that a man who follows a fool becomes a fool himself! If there were no fruit in actions then why does this man live as a naked ascetic? Led astray by such ideas people will make lots of demerit and suffer in the future."

She continued: "These bystanders could not see the full picture. Let me illustrate with a simile: A boat can take a great burden, until it becomes overloaded, and then it sinks. In the same way a person may do bad deeds and only sink into hell after he accumulates a lot. This minister you mention must have not yet accumulated enough evil to sink to hell, and did good deeds in past lives too."

Seeing that the king was not yet persuaded, the princess decided to tell him of her own past lives: "Your majesty, I remember seven past lives. In my seventh past birth I was a goldsmith, and led on by an evil friend I did a lot of bad deeds, including going after other men's wives. That karma remained like fire covered by ash, and in my next birth I was born as a wealthy treasurer. I was virtuous and did a great many good deeds, which remained like treasure buried in the water. Next my bad karma caught up with me and I was born in a hell and boiled on account of my actions as a goldsmith. After all this torment I was born as a castrated billy goat, forced to carry people around and pull heavy carts. In my next birth I was a monkey, son of the leader of the troop, who bit off my testicles in order to prevent me becoming a rival. After that I was born as an ox, a beast of burden, and then at last as human again, though I was neither male nor female. All this was because of my pursuit of other men's wives when I was a goldsmith. Finally I was born in a heaven, and now as a princess, and I will remain female for seven more lifetimes because of my bad karma. So you see, father, that actions follow you over many lifetimes."

Still the king was unmoved. In desperation the princess implored the gods[3] to intervene, to save her father from his evil actions and their inevitable consequences. A god heard her, and, taking on the appearance of a sage, he

[3] In Buddhism gods are part of the realms of rebirth, and though they have long lives and many powers and pleasures, they will eventually die and be reborn again.

descended to the palace and stood in the air near the king. The king was amazed by this display of power and asked, “Who are you, sir, and how are you able to stand in the air in this way?” The divine sage replied, “I am a god, come from the heavens. I have these powers because of the good actions I performed in past lives.”

“Are there really other realms as you say?” asked the king. “Indeed there are, your majesty.” “If that is the case,” replied the king, smiling, “then lend me five hundred gold coins and I’ll repay you a thousand in the next world!” The divine sage replied, “I would certainly do that if I could trust you to repay. But who is going to follow you into the hell realms to reclaim a debt? When you are being pecked at by birds, or pulled apart by iron-toothed dogs, who will reclaim a debt then? Or when you are drowning in the caustic river of hell, or being forced to pull carriages over red-hot coals, who will approach you to reclaim a debt there?”

After the divine sage had given a long and detailed description of the hells, the king was terrified, and begged him for a teaching. “Be good to your citizens and give generously and you will avoid hell and enter heaven,” replied the divine sage. Having instructed the king, the divine sage disappeared into thin air. The king reformed, and never again doubted that actions have results in future lifetimes.

The Story of Prince Vessantara

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: generosity, non-attachment

Notes for teachers

The Story of Prince Vessantara, a tale of extraordinary generosity, is one of the most important narratives in the Buddhist world. Despite its ethically troubling centrepiece – when the hero gives away his children as slaves – the story is popular as the subject of sermons, art, literature and ritual. Annual ritual recitations or reenactments take place across Southeast Asia.

This story is a jataka tale, that is to say a story of a past life of the Buddha. (For more information about the jataka genre see separate resource sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources/) Indeed, in the Theravada tradition the Buddha's time as Vessantara is understood to have been his final human life before the one in which he attained buddhahood. As a result, he is understood to be very close to perfection in this story, and this is likely to be the reason why the story has such a central place in Theravada culture and religion.

Generosity or giving is a key value in Buddhism. It demonstrates important Buddhist virtues such as **detachment** (towards the thing given), **compassion** (for the recipient in need) and **faith** (when the gift is given to a member of the Buddhist community or the Buddha himself).

In early India the most worthy recipient of a gift was a **brahmin** (a member of the Hindu priestly caste), which explains why most recipients of the Buddha-to-be's generosity in Indian Buddhist stories are brahmins (or gods in disguise as brahmins). **Shakra** (also known as Indra, and found in Hindu and Jain stories as well as Buddhist ones) is a god that is well known for testing the virtue of humans.

For Buddhists, the most worthy recipient of a gift is a member of the Buddhist monastic community or the Buddha himself (either in person or as an image or bodily relics). Giving a gift to the monastic community is compared to planting a seed in a fertile "field of merit" since it results in much positive karmic fruition (and

so a happy rebirth). It also ensures the survival of the community, which is reliant entirely on donations.

For the Buddha in his past lives, however, there are not normally any Buddhists to give to, since he is living in a time before Buddhism (or, more accurately, between Buddhist dispensations). Instead, he tends to practice more extreme forms of giving, such as giving away body parts, sacrificing his life, or giving away his wife and children. These gifts are made to all sorts of recipients whether "worthy" or not. This extreme giving demonstrates his extraordinary resolve to attain buddhahood, but it is not usually considered necessary for normal Buddhists to emulate him, as they can instead give more moderate gifts to the Buddhist community.

Buddhists have discussed the ethical problems surrounding Vessantara's gift of his children for around two millennia. Common justifications for his actions include: (1) Vessantara knew the children would be fine, so it was okay. (2) He had to give away what was asked of him, otherwise he would not be a proper Buddha-in-the-making. (3) It might seem harsh but it was for a much greater good – the achievement of buddhahood and the founding of the Buddhist tradition – and both the wife and children (reborn as members of the Buddha's family) received the benefits of the Buddha's teaching and achieved nirvana.

Although the story is not treated as a model to be followed by all Buddhists (rather it emphasises the awe-inspiring acts of the Buddha), some minor form of emulation does occur: In some parts of Southeast Asia, parents "give away" their children to the monastery as ordinands, though often the ordination is only temporary.

<u>Using this story alongside other related resources:</u>
You could consider reading this story alongside the story-cycle of King Shibi, which tells of bodily gift-giving, another important form of generosity practised by the Buddha-to-be.
Another helpful comparison is with the Hindu story of the Ramayana, which shares key features, though it explores different values. Hindu values are much more pro-family and emphasise duty. For Buddhists, especially at the time of the Vessantara story's composition, the emphasis is on the necessity of detaching from family.
You might also consider discussing this story alongside the Old Testament narrative of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son.

There is a powerpoint presentation to accompany this resource.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Why does Vessantara give away his magical rain-bringing elephant? (Was he right to do so?)

Why did the citizens not want Vessantara to keep giving stuff away? Were they justified in asking for him to be exiled?

Why did Vessantara's father agree to exile Vessantara? Was there another possible solution to the problem of his excessive giving?

What is the role of Maddi in the story? Why does she insist on following Vessantara to the forest? Why does she accept his need to give away her children and even herself?

Is it important to the story that Vessantara gets all his family back again at the end?

Application to other contexts

What sorts of gift are good to give?

Does it matter who receives the gift, or whether the gift is useful to the person receiving it?

Is generosity always a good thing? Is it sometimes in conflict with other values?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

Why did/do Buddhists use stories to illustrate the importance of giving?

Why is giving important in Buddhism?

Should all Buddhists give the same sorts of gifts as the Buddha did in his past lives?

Are there other ways in which Buddhists might learn from the Buddha's actions?

Does it matter whether or not the events in the story actually happened?

This story is believed in the Theravada Buddhist tradition (in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia) to be the last of the jataka stories. After his lifetime as Vessantara, the Buddha-to-be was born as a god for a while, then again as a human, in which lifetime he became the Buddha ('Awakened One'). What does this add to the story? How does Vessantara show that he is ready for buddhahood? What qualities does he demonstrate?

This story makes a lot of Buddhists uncomfortable, because everyone is shocked by the idea of giving away one's children and wife. How might Buddhists justify such an extreme gift?

The Vessantara story is really popular in Buddhist countries, especially in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Laos, Burma/Myanmar, etc) where it is regularly recited and re-enacted, and illustrated on temple walls or painted scrolls. Why do you think it is so popular?

Using the story in comparison with other narratives:

How does the story of Vessantara compare to the story-cycle of King Shibi? Are both heroes demonstrating the same kind of generosity? Which is most extraordinary?

How does the story of Vessantara compare to the Ramayana?
Both are stories of exile and separation from beloved family, and both were composed in a similar region and at a similar time. What do the similarities and differences in these two stories tell us about the similarities and differences between Buddhist and Hindu values and ideals?

Sources / Further Reading

This version is summarised from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 547. There are two good translations of the full (long) story available: Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara* (The Pali Text Society 2011, or OUP 1977), and the final story in Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw (trans.) *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha* (Silkworm, 2015). Both also contain useful introductory material. An older translation is available here: http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/j6/j6013.htm
If you want to explore different dimensions of the story see Steven Collins (ed.) *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

The Story of Prince Vessantara

The Buddha told this story of the past:

Long ago, there was a prince named Vessantara. He was renowned for being a generous child, indeed as soon as he was born he asked for a present to give to the midwives who had helped deliver him! When he was grown up, and married with a son and daughter, his father decided to let him rule over the kingdom. But Vessantara gave lots of the state wealth away. He even gave away a magical rain-bringing elephant to a neighbouring kingdom where they were having a drought. This was too much for the people, who did not like to see their country's wealth disappear. They demanded that the king strip Vessantara of his status and exile him to the forest.

Vessantara, his wife Maddi (who insisted on going too) and their children prepared for their exile. They set off in a carriage, but soon some men came and asked for the horses, and Vessantara gave them away. Some gods took disguise as deer and pulled the carriage a little further, but then another man asked for the carriage, and Vessantara gave it away. The family proceeded on foot, Vessantara carrying their son and Maddi their daughter. They set up a new life in a forest hermitage.

Meanwhile, in a neighbouring city, a young woman was always getting teased when she fetched water, for she was married to an old and ugly brahmin.[4] She had heard of Vessantara's generosity, and decided to ask her husband to seek out the exiled prince and ask for servants, so that she could avoid having to go to the well again. Unable to endure her nagging, the man, named Jujuka, set out towards the forest. In due course he approached Vessantara's hermitage.

At that time Maddi was out in the forest gathering fruits and roots for their meal, and Vessantara was sitting by the hermitage, while the children played nearby. Seeing the brahmin approaching Vessantara rose from his seat and greeted him warmly. "What can I offer you?" he asked. "I would like your children as slaves," replied Jujuka. Although Vessantara loved his children deeply, he rejoiced at the chance to make such a significant gift. He called the children over and presented them to Jujuka, pouring water on his hands to seal the gift. The brahmin tied them up and led them off, the children wailing and crying out to their father to relent, or

[4] A brahmin is a member of the Hindu priestly caste. In early India it was considered a very good thing to give a gift to a brahmin.

at least to let them stay long enough to say goodbye to their mother. But Jujuka insisted on taking the children there and then. Maddi, meanwhile, had been delayed in the forest by gods disguised as wild animals.

When Maddi returned and could not see her children she was distraught. She looked for them everywhere, calling out to them and worrying that they had been lost or hurt. She begged Vessantara to tell her what had happened, and eventually he did. After her husband had explained that he had given the children away to a brahmin, Maddi became calm, and accepted that the gift had been necessary.

The next day another brahmin appeared in the forest. Just as before, Vessantara welcomed him and asked what he could give. The brahmin replied that he would like Maddi, Vessantara's wife. Vessantara agreed to this gift, and Maddi also willingly accepted that the gift should be made, so he handed her over. But as soon as he had done so, the brahmin revealed himself as the god Shakra[5] in disguise, come to help Vessantara perfect his generosity. He returned Maddi to her husband and praised Vessantara highly for his commitment to giving.

Meanwhile Jujuka, trying to lead the children back to his home, was getting lost in the forest, and somehow found himself in the city over which Vessantara's father was ruling. The children were recognised, and the brahmin dragged before the king. The king ransomed the children from Jujuka by giving him large quantities of wealth and food, and so freed his grandchildren. Soon afterwards Jujuka died from overeating, and, since nobody knew where he was from, all his wealth returned to the king.

The king was very upset at what had happened to Vessantara and his family, and deeply regretted exiling his son. He and his wife, along with their grandchildren, set out to invite Vessantara and Maddi home. The family reunion was emotional, and there was much celebration!

When Vessantara re-entered his city, the gods rained jewels down from the heavens so that he would never run out of things to give away.

The Buddha explained the connection between the past and the present: "At that time I was Prince Vessantara, and my family then is my family now."

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[5] In Buddhism gods have long lives and special powers, but they eventually die and are reborn according to their karma. Shakra often likes to test human beings.

The Story-cycle of King Shibi

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: generosity, self-sacrifice, compassion

Notes for teachers

King Shibi is famous across Buddhist, Jain and Hindu legend. In the Buddhist tradition he is understood to have been the Buddha in a past life, demonstrating his extraordinary willingness to give. As such, this story is a jataka, or a tale of a past life of the Buddha. (For more information about the jataka genre see resource sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources/)

Generosity or giving is a key value in Buddhism. It demonstrates important Buddhist virtues such as **detachment** (towards the thing given), **compassion** (for the recipient in need) and **faith** (when the gift is given to a member of the Buddhist community or the Buddha himself).

In early India the most worthy recipient of a gift was a **brahmin** (a member of the Hindu priestly caste), which explains why most recipients of the Buddha-to-be's generosity in Indian Buddhist stories are brahmins (or gods in disguise as brahmins). **Shakra** (also known as Indra, and found in Hindu and Jain stories as well as Buddhist ones) is a god that is well known for testing the virtue of humans.

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For the Buddha in his past lives, however, there are not normally any Buddhists to give to, since he is in a time before Buddhism (or, more accurately, between Buddhist dispensations). Instead, he tends to practice more extreme forms of giving, such as giving away body parts, sacrificing his life, or giving away his wife and children. These gifts are made to all sorts of recipients whether "worthy" or not. This extreme giving demonstrates his extraordinary resolve to attain buddhahood, but it is not usually considered necessary for normal Buddhists to emulate him, as they can instead give more moderate gifts to the Buddhist community. That said,

some minor form of emulation does occur: Buddhists are encouraged to donate blood, and to be organ donors, for example, and Sri Lanka (in which the story of King Shibi is particularly popular) has a huge number of donated corneas.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
Why did Shibi want to give away parts of his body? Why couldn't he be satisfied with giving away money or other things like that?
Why did Shibi give away his eyes even though the blind man would not be able to use them?
Why did Shibi offer his own flesh to save the life of the dove? Was this necessary?
Why do the gods test King Shibi? What might their motivations be?

Application to other contexts
What sorts of gift are good to give?
Does it matter who receives the gift, or whether the gift is useful?
Is generosity always a good thing? Is it possible to be too generous?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues
Why did/do Buddhists use stories to illustrate the importance of giving?
Why is giving important in Buddhism?
What does it mean for this story to be a jataka story? What can we learn from it about the qualities of the Buddha?
Should all Buddhists give the same sorts of gifts as the Buddha did in his past lives?
What does this story tell us about the Buddhist attitude to the body?
The great generosity of King Shibi is also described in Hindu stories. What might the advantages be of the Buddhists telling their own stories about this famous king?

Sources / Further Reading

This resource brings together two of the many stories about King Shibi. The gift of eyes is told in *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 499 - http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j4/j4063.htm.
The gift of flesh to ransom a dove is not currently available in accessible translation.

The Story-cycle of King Shibi

King Shibi was a very generous king, who always gave whatever was asked of him.

One day a blind man approached the king. "What can I give you, sir?" asked King Shibi. "Your eyes," replied the blind man. Without hesitation the king plucked out his eyes and gave them to the man. The man revealed himself to be the god Shakra[6] in disguise, who had come to test the extent of the king's generosity. He praised the king and magically restored his eyes, granting him divine sight, before disappearing back to his heavenly realm.

One day a dove flew into the king's palace and landed on his lap, begging for refuge. "I grant you safety, little bird," said the king. But then a falcon approached and demanded the dove for his meal: "I have been chasing this bird and need him for my dinner! Hand him over!" The king refused, saying, "I have offered him protection, and so I cannot allow you to eat him." The falcon was angry: "How can you offer refuge to this dove and not to me? I am starving hungry and will surely die if I don't get my meal. Will you protect his life at the expense of mine?" The king offered the falcon all sorts of food but the falcon was not interested, insisting "I only eat freshly killed meat!"

So King Shibi offered the falcon some flesh from his own thigh, equivalent to the weight of the dove, as an alternative, and the falcon agreed. "Bring out some scales!" cried the king. He placed the dove in one pan of the scales, and to the horror of all those around him he began slicing off his flesh and placing it in the other pan. But however much flesh he put in the scales, it never seemed to equal the weight of the dove. In the end, the king climbed up into the scales himself, offering his whole body in order to save the dove.

At this moment the dove and the falcon revealed their true identities as gods who had come to test the extent of the king's generosity. They praised King Shibi highly, and he became renowned throughout the world for his willingness to give.

The Buddha told these stories about King Shibi to demonstrate the importance of giving. He identified himself as having been King Shibi in a past lifetime.

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[6] Shakra, or Indra, is king of the gods, and he enjoys testing the virtue of human beings. In Buddhism, gods are long-lived but still subject to death and rebirth according to their karma.

The Monkey King

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: compassion, self-sacrifice, leadership

Notes for teachers

This is one of the most popular jataka stories in Buddhism. (For information about jataka stories – tales of the past lives of the Buddha – see separate handout on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources.) It demonstrates three key qualities: compassion or concern for the welfare of others, willingness to sacrifice oneself for others, and wise leadership.

The strong leadership of the Buddha-to-be is often demonstrated in his jataka stories. Here he does his best to prevent trouble, and when trouble nonetheless appears, he does what is necessary to ensure the welfare of all of his troop, even at the expense of his own life. Compassion is a key virtue in Buddhism: Buddhists are encouraged to think about how they can help others, but also having a compassionate state of mind is something that is cultivated during meditation. Compassion is also a necessary part of the path to buddhahood, and in Mahayana Buddhism (where becoming a bodhisattva and then a buddha is the ultimate aim) there are lots of stories about extreme acts of compassionate self-sacrifice.

The imagery of a river is also significant. In Buddhist similes samsara (the constant round of redeath and rebirth) is said to be like a raging ocean or river, and nirvana (awakening or enlightenment) is compared to the further shore. In this story the monkey (the Buddha in a past life) could simply escape, as he is strong enough to reach the further shore alone. However, he chooses to help others by making himself into a bridge to the further shore, just as in a later lifetime – when he becomes Buddha – he teaches others how to achieve nirvana.

Another parallel between past life and "present" life is the role of the Buddha's cousin, called Devadatta. In the jataka story Devadatta is the monkey who breaks his leader's back. This characterisation is because in the "present" time of the Buddha, Devadatta tries to have the Buddha killed and to split his community.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
How did the humans come to find out about the mango tree?
Why did the human king want to kill the monkeys? Was he right?
Why didn't the monkey king just escape on his own?
Why is the human king so impressed by the monkey's self-sacrifice?
Are humans shown as worse than animals in this story?

Application to other contexts
What does it take to be a good leader?
Do animals and humans have the same standards of behaviour?
What causes the conflict between the monkeys and the humans? Can we learn something from this about the causes of conflict more generally?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues
Why do Buddhists tell stories about self-sacrifice?
Why is compassion an important quality for Buddhists?
What do we learn from this story about Buddhist ideas about the responsibilities of kings, or about leadership more broadly? How does this relate to wider Buddhist teachings?
This story is a jataka tale. What do we gain from understanding that the Buddha was the monkey king in a past life? What about the knowledge that the mean monkey was a past birth of the Buddha's troublemaking cousin Devadatta?
[Note: Pupils may be familiar with Devadatta from the story Siddhartha and the Swan, in which case you could invite comparisons between the two stories.]

Sources / Further Reading

This story is summarised from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 407, which can be found in full translation in Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* (Penguin, 2006) or at http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j3/j3108.htm. Another version forms *Jātakamālā* 27, which can be found in Peter Khoroche (trans.) *Once the Buddha was a Monkey* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).
For more information about what it means to be a jataka story see separate sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

The Monkey King

Long ago, the Buddha was born as a monkey. He was brave and clever, and became the leader of the whole troop. The monkeys lived in a mango tree next to a river, and were very happy eating the delicious fruits. The king of the monkeys told everyone to be careful not to let any of the fruits fall in the water, in case they should come into the hands of humans.

Despite their care, a single mango fell un-noticed into the river, and floated downstream. When it came near to a city, it was fished out and presented to the king. The king took one bite and was completely enchanted. It was the most delicious mango he had ever eaten! He wished to know where the fruit had come from, so that he could have more.

The king took a band of soldiers up the river, to try to find the source of the mango. Eventually they reached the large mango tree, weighed down with fruits, but full also of monkeys greedily consuming the tasty mangoes. The king, wanting all the fruits for himself, ordered the soldiers to shoot the monkeys.

The tree was surrounded, and there was no way for the monkeys to escape. They were terrified, all except their leader. He calmly surveyed his options, and using his immense strength he leapt across the river. Once on the further shore, he found a strong creeper and tied one end around his waist and the other around a sturdy tree. Then he took a huge leap back across the river and grabbed hold of a branch of the mango tree with his hands. There he stayed, making a bridge for his followers.

All the monkeys ran across this bridge, over the river to safety. They tried to go gently, but it was nonetheless very painful for the monkey king. The last monkey to cross was the king's cousin, a bad-tempered and mean monkey. As he crossed, he jumped on his leader's back, breaking it.

The king, meanwhile, watched all these events in amazement. How could even a monkey show such compassionate concern for his subjects, he wondered. He ordered the soldiers to help the injured monkey to the ground. He placed the monkey-king on a seat and paid him honour. The monkey king, with his dying breath, gave the human king a teaching about the duties of rulers to look after their citizens.

The Story of the What's-It Tree

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: impermanence, appearance vs reality, wisdom

Notes for teachers

This story is about the perils of incomplete understanding, and the arguments that arise when everyone thinks they are right!

Having a proper understanding of reality is an important goal of Buddhism, so stories about ignorance or delusion are fairly common. In this story it is ignorance about how something (here a tree) might change radically over time that causes problems. As such it is also a story about the Buddhist teaching of impermanence, the idea that everything is in a constant state of flux and that nothing has a single and fixed essence.

The tree's Latin name is *Butea Monosperma*. An internet search for images will reveal why the four brothers were so confused. Its flowers are red and fleshy, and it looks strikingly different at different times of the year. See also the associated powerpoint document on the website, which contains some images.

This story is usefully told along with another popular Buddhist tale, about blind men trying to describe an elephant when they have only touched parts of it. This story is about only knowing parts of a whole, or only having part of the truth, so a slightly different angle to the What's-It tree.

In both stories the incomplete – and therefore competing – understandings of reality lead to quarrels, and quarreling is therefore presented as a foolish thing. Some retellings of the story of the elephant, including a famous rendition by the American poet John G. Saxe, emphasise the teaching of moral relativism. However, for Buddhists a complete understanding of truth is possible (for awakened beings such as the Buddha) but we would all be wise to accept that our *current* knowledge may be incomplete in some way.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
Are the brothers right or wrong when they say that they know what the tree looks like?
Why can't any of the brothers describe the tree fully?
How do you think they would describe the tree if they had all seen it at all four times of the year?
Why does the difference in what they see lead to them fighting?
How does this story compare to the story of the blind men and the elephant?

Application to other contexts
How can we be sure that we are seeing the true state of things?
In what other ways can appearances be deceptive?
What are the potential consequences of only having an incomplete view of something? Is it dangerous to only see something from one point of view?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues
Why did/do Buddhists use stories to illustrate the differences between appearance and reality?
Why is the ability to see the truth behind appearances important to Buddhism?
What Buddhist qualities or concepts does it relate to?
How does the tree help us to understand the doctrine of impermanence?

Sources / Further Reading

The What's-It Tree story is abbreviated from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* number 248, which can be found in full translation in Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* (Penguin, 2006)or at http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j2/j2101.htm
For more information about what it means to be a jataka story see separate sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

The Blind Men and the Elephant is found in a Pāli text called the *Udāna*, but is also present in lots of other texts both within and outside the Buddhist tradition. There are several YouTube renditions, including of the famous verse version by John G. Saxe – see for example https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJVBQefNXIw

The Story of the What's-It Tree

The Buddha told this story after four monks achieved nirvana through different forms of meditation, to explain that there can be many different approaches to the same thing.

In the past, there were four princes who wanted to see a famous tree, known as the *kimsuka* or "what's-it" tree. They asked their charioteer to take them to see it. He agreed, but instead of taking them all together, he took them one at a time, at different times in the year. He showed the older brother the tree when there were just buds on the trunk. The next he took to see the tree when the leaves were fresh and green. The next he took when the tree's large, flesh-coloured flowers were in bloom. The youngest he took when the tree was in fruit.

Later on the princes began to talk about the nature of the what's-it tree. One said it looked like a charred stump. Another said it was like a lovely green banyan tree. The third said it was like a mass of flesh. The last insisted it was more like an acacia tree. They began to argue, each one accusing the other of being wrong.

Their father, the king, came to know of their discussions. He explained to them that they had all seen the same tree, but in different conditions.

The Buddha explained it to the monks, saying: "At that time I was the wise king."

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Some blind men were shown an elephant and asked to describe it. One, who had touched the head, said it was like a water pot. Another, who was familiar with the ears, said it was like a winnowing basket. Another, who had touched a leg, said an elephant was like a post. Another, who had felt a tusk, said the elephant was like a peg. Then they started to argue over who was right. But of course, they were all right, and all wrong.

The Cat and the Mice

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Values and Issues: hypocrisy, appearance vs reality, wisdom, morality

Notes for teachers

The story of the cat ascetic (sometimes also identified as a jackal) is found in lots of different Indian story collections. Stories of false ascetics are an important narrative genre in early India, not only within Buddhist texts. Most likely the stories served as a popular warning against frauds who could be found amongst the many wandering hermits and teachers of the time. Blind faith is not encouraged by the Buddha. Rather, he is believed to have taught his followers to question everything he said and test it against their own reason and experience.

The heroic mouse (or, in some versions, rat) who sees the true nature of the cat is declared in this story to be the Buddha in a past life. (In other Indian versions of the story this is not the case.) The tale is therefore a "jataka" story, that is to say a story of a past life of the Buddha. For more information about the jataka genre see separate resource sheet on www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Correct understanding of reality is an important part of the Buddhist path. Insight or wisdom is a key quality of the Buddha and of all awakened beings (beings who have achieved nirvana). As such, stories of how the Buddha was able to see through deceptions or misunderstandings even in his past lives are popular in Buddhist story collections. The Buddha-to-be is also often portrayed in jataka tales as a strong leader who protects his followers and helps them out of trouble, as in this story.

That said, in this story the Buddha-to-be also transgresses Buddhist morality by killing another animal, which raises questions about the different levels of Buddhist teaching being explored in the tale. It is likely that the story was absorbed into the jataka genre from the wider Indian story pot, and so it does not make for the perfect exemplary Buddhist tale.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story
What does the cat do to show that he is holy?
Why does the cat pretend to be holy?
Why do the mice believe him?
How does the chief mouse work out the truth?
Why does the mouse kill the cat?

Application to other contexts
Can appearances be deceptive?
How can we test if something is really as it appears?
Is it right to trust religious teachers and leaders?
What is hypocrisy?
Is it right that the mouse kills the cat? How else could the story have been resolved?
Is the mouse a good leader?
Are there different groups in society that have particular rules for animals?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues
Why might Buddhists have told stories about false holy men?
Why is the ability to see the truth behind appearances important to Buddhism?
What Buddhist qualities or concepts does it relate to?
Given the Buddhist prohibition of killing, is it a problem that when the Buddha was a mouse he killed a cat? Was he right to do so?
Do different rules apply to animals and humans?

Sources / Further Reading

The story is abbreviated from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* number 128. It can be found in full translation in Sarah Shaw (trans.), *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* (Penguin, 2006) or in an older translation here: http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j1/j1131.htm

The Cat and the Mice

The Buddha told this story about a monk who was a cheat, to show that he was also a cheat in the past.

Long ago, the Buddha-to-be happened to be born as a mouse. He was the leader of a large group of mice, and he was very large, as big as a small piglet. A cat used to roam nearby, and spotted the group of mice. He decided to find a way to make a meal of them. He took on the pose of a holy ascetic, standing on one foot, facing the sun, breathing in the air. When the chief of the mice saw him, he approached and asked, "What is your name?" "I am called the Holy One," said the cat. "Why do you stand on one foot?" "Because the earth cannot support all four of my feet." "Why do you have your mouth open?" asked the mouse. "I do not eat food, but only the wind," he replied. "And why do you face the burning sun?" "I am paying honour to the Sun-god," replied the cat.

"He must be very holy," thought the mouse, and so every day he brought his company of mice to pay repects to the cat. And every day, the last mouse to leave was caught by the cat and eaten, without the other mice noticing.

After some time, the chief mouse noticed the reduction in size of his company of mice. He began to suspect the cat, and so the next time the mice visited the cat, he made sure he was the last to leave. The cat sprang forward to catch him, but the chief mouse saw him coming and jumped up to bite his neck. "So this is your holy practice is it?" he cried out. Then he severed the cat's neck and killed him, and all the mice came and ate him up with a crunch crunch crunch. Or at least I have heard that the first ones got meat, but those who were at the back got none, for it was all gone.

The Buddha gave his teaching and explained the connection of the births: "At that time I was the leader of the mice, and the cheating monk was the cat."

The Challenges of Meditation

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Practices and Traditions: meditation, determination

Notes for teachers

Meditation is a key practice for Buddhists. It is often carried out formally, in one of four recommended postures (sitting, lying, standing and walking), but it can also be integrated into various activities. In the early tradition there are said to be five hindrances to meditation: desire, ill will, sloth and torpor (mental and physical tiredness), restlessness and worry, and doubt. Stories of people encountering – and overcoming – these challenges are a good way of encouraging Buddhists to continue to pursue meditative states.

The first of the two stories here is one such tale, and to make it all the more encouraging it refers to the monk Moggallana, who was one of the two seniormost followers of the Buddha. Moggallana is struggling to stay awake during his meditation, and the Buddha provides a variety of ways to tackle this, moving towards ever more pragmatic advice such as getting up and splashing the eyes with water. And if none of these succeeds in getting rid of the drowsiness, the Buddha advises a nap!

The second story also concerns a senior follower of the Buddha, the monk Ananda. Here there is a focus on overcoming desire. Not only is Ananda's attachment to the Buddha said to be the reason for him not having achieved awakening / nirvana during the Buddha's lifetime, but desire to achieve this state in time for the great gathering of monks after the Buddha's death is a hindrance to the goal. In addition to showing how Ananda overcame his desire and attachment, the story of his acievement of awakening while climbing into bed – explicitly not in any of the four recommended meditation postures – reminds the audience not to take the prescriptions about practice too seriously.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the stories

What is the problem in each of these stories? What is the solution?
What do we learn about the challenges of meditation?
What do we learn about the Buddha and his followers?

Application to other contexts

Is the Buddha's advice about overcoming sleepiness helpful in other situations?
Is it always a good idea to try really hard?
Can you think of situations where it might be better to let go rather than keep trying?
How would you be able to decide whether you should keep trying or give up?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

Why is meditation an important practice for Buddhists? What does it lead to?
What are the challenges of meditation? Are there other challenges not discussed here? Can you think of other stories that might help encourage Buddhists who are experiencing difficulties in their meditation?
What is the role of effort or determination in the Buddhist path? How does effort relate to attachment or desire?
Why might Buddhists tell stories of key followers of the Buddha?

Sources / Further Reading

The tale of Moggallana is translated (with some parts abbreviated) from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (7.61) and the tale of Ananda is summarised from the Pali commentarial tradition. A good general resource for meditation texts from the Buddhist scriptures is Sarah Shaw, *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from the Pali Canon* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).

The Challenges of Meditation: Sleepy Moggallana

At one time the Buddha became aware, through his supernormal vision, that the Venerable Moggallana, one of his most senior monks, was sitting and dozing in a far away region. As quickly as one might bend one's arm or straighten it again, the Buddha disappeared from where he was staying and reappeared in front of Moggallana.

"Are you dozing, Moggallana? Are you nodding off?" he asked. "Yes, lord," replied Moggallana. The Buddha advised:

"Well then, Moggallana, whenever you become drowsy you should not give any attention to that thought of sleepiness. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should reflect upon the Teaching as you have heard it and learned it, you should think it over and examine it carefully in your mind. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should recite in full the Teaching as you have heard it and learned it. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should pull both ears and rub your limbs with your hands. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should get up from your seat, splash your eyes with water, and look around you in all directions and upwards to the stars and constellations. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should concentrate on the thought of light, and focus on the perception of day thus: 'As by day so by night; as by night so by day.' With your mind clear and open, you should cultivate a mind that is full of brightness. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should walk up and down, with your senses turned inward and your mind restrained, being aware of what is in front of and behind you. By doing that, it is possible that your drowsiness will vanish."

"If your sleepiness does not vanish through that, then you should lie down on your right side, mindfully and clearly aware, keeping in mind the thought of rising. And when you wake up, you should quickly get up, thinking 'I will not indulge in the pleasure of resting and reclining, in the pleasure of sleeping.' In this way, Moggallana, you should train yourself."

The Challenges of Meditation: Ananda tries too hard

After the Buddha's death, the senior monk Venerable Maha Kassapa called a meeting of five hundred monks, all of whom had achieved awakening (nirvana). The Buddha's personal attendant, a monk named Ananda, was not invited, as he had not yet achieved awakening, perhaps because of his strong attachment to the Buddha. This was troubling, for not only was Ananda a longstanding and loyal follower, he had also committed to memory all of the Buddha's teachings. It was therefore very important that he be included in the gathering, but Maha Kassapa was adamant that only awakened monks could attend.

In the days leading up the meeting Ananda tried his hardest to achieve awakening. He meditated extensively in all the different recommended ways, and exerted himself to the full, but try as he might, he could not achieve awakening. At last, the night before the great meeting, he admitted defeat and gave up. Then, as he climbed into bed, feet barely off the floor and head not yet on the pillow, the Venerable Ananda finally achieved awakening.

Janaka

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Buddhism; Practices and Traditions: renunciation, non-attachment, determination

Notes for teachers

In early Buddhist traditions, and to this day in many Buddhist countries, **renunciation** is considered key to spiritual progress. The Buddha himself was famous for his renunciation, and he founded a monastic community (for monks and nuns) that allowed his most committed followers to pursue religious learning and practice away from the distractions of worldly life. Renunciation is closely linked to the ideal of **non-attachment**. According to Buddhist philosophy, attachment (or desire, or thirst) is what keeps us all bound in the cycle of rebirth and redeath. By overcoming this attachment we are able to attain nirvana or awakening.

This story is part of a closely related network of tales about kings called Janaka who were famous for renouncing. Often they left their kingdoms as the result of seeing a particular sign, such as their own grey hair, or – in this case – a pair of mango trees. Stories of this lineage of kings were known to all three religious traditions of early India – Hindu, Buddhist and Jain. The verse about Mithila being on fire is repeated many times in the literature of all three traditions, which used these stories as a way of exploring the central tension in the early Indian religious landscape, between worldly pursuits/responsibilities and the desire for renunciation.

In addition to renunciation, this story is about the power of **energetic determination**: the hero makes great efforts to win back his father's kingdom (as demonstrated in particular by his response to being shipwrecked) and then makes even greater efforts to renounce what he has won. The contrast between these two goals is clear, but effort and determination are nonetheless praised as crucial to progress on the Buddhist path.

The story of Janaka is, in the Buddhist tradition, a jataka tale, that is to say a story of a past life of the Buddha. (See separate resource sheet for more information about the jataka genre.)

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

What does Janaka have to do to win back his father's kingdom?
What does Janaka have to do to give it up?
Why is it important that Janaka wins back his kingdom before giving it up? What would change if the story began with him already king?
Which requires the greatest effort: regaining the kingdom, or leaving it?
What images, metaphors and similes are used to prompt solitary renunciation? How do they work? Do they all work in the same way? What other metaphors or images can you think of?

Application to other contexts

What does this story tell us about family relationships?
Is it right for a husband to leave a wife like this?
What are the benefits of living alone? What are the benefits of living with others?
What does this story tell us about the need for determination in pursuit of our goals?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

What is the role of gods/goddesses in this story? How do they fit into the Buddhist worldview?
Is it important that the hero is identified as the Buddha in a past life? How does that change our understanding of the story?
Is Buddhist renunciation always solitary?
What are the particular benefits of solitary renunciation?
How does renunciation relate to the Buddhist principle of non-attachment?
What do we learn from the story about the Buddhist need for determined effort in order to fulfil Buddhist practices and goals?

Sources / Further Reading

The story here is my own abridged translation of *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 539. The full translation is in Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw (trans.) *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 2015) and an older translation can also be found here: http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j6/j6005.htm

Janaka

The Buddha told this story to his monks in order to demonstrate that it was not only in his final lifetime that he renounced the world in the pursuit of religious truth.

In the city of Mithila, in the Northeast Indian kingdom of Magadha, long long ago, there was a king who ruled with his younger brother as viceroy. At first the two brothers worked well together, and enjoyed peaceful and prosperous rule. However, rumours started to spread that the king's younger brother was plotting him, and so the king had him sent into exile. Indignant at the false accusations, the younger brother gathered together his supporters and prepared to take the kingdom from his brother by force. As the king prepared to go into battle to defend the kingdom, he told his wife, heavily pregnant, that she should at all costs ensure the safety of their child.

Before long news reached the queen that the king had been killed. She filled a basket with jewels, stretched a rag over them and poured rice on top of that. She dressed herself in dirty rags and left the city via the northern gate, hoping to travel to a place she had heard of called Champa. But she had never been out of the palace alone, and did not know how to get there, so she sat by the road and called out to passers by, asking if any of them knew the way. The king of the gods, Sakka,[7] seeing her pitiful state, took disguise as a merchant and offered her a ride on his wagon. Although Champa was many miles away, through his magical powers they arrived by nightfall, and the queen entered the city. A kindly man allowed her to live with his family as his sister, and there she gave birth to her son, Janaka. In the course of time, the baby grew into a child, and the child grew into a young man.

Janaka always wondered about his parentage, and was much teased by the other children. Eventually he forced his mother to tell him the truth: "You are the son of a king, whose brother now rules in Mithila city. Your uncle took the city and killed your father, and I fled here." Wishing to avenge his father's death and recapture the city, Janaka decided to go to sea to make money that he could then use to muster an army. His mother begged him not to make such a dangerous journey, and offered him her jewels, but he was adamant. He and five hundred other merchants filled up a vessel with goods and set out to sea. On that very same day the king of Mithila, Janaka's uncle, became ill and took to his bed.

[7] In Buddhism the gods have extra powers and long lives, but they are not immortal: they will eventually die and be reborn elswhere. Gods can help humans in times of need, as here, but awakened humans – such as the Buddha – are superior to gods.

In the middle of the ocean a huge storm arose, and this broke the ship apart. As his companions fell into the water and were devoured by sea-monsters, Janaka clung to the mast until the last moment. Then he jumped into the ocean and began swimming towards Mithila. On that same day the king of Mithila, Janaka's uncle, died.

Janaka was miles and miles from the shore, with no land in sight, yet he kept on swimming for seven long days and seven long nights. Eventually the goddess of the ocean spotted him, and – standing in the sky – asked him why he kept swimming even though there was no hope of reaching land. He replied that he should at least try. She was impressed by his persistence, and so she rescued him, plucking him from the water like a bunch of flowers and carrying him to Mithila, where she laid him down on a stone slab in a park.

Meanwhile, in the city there was trouble. This king had no male heir, only a daughter, named Sivali, who was wise and virtuous. He had decreed that the next king would be able to please his daughter, or to solve a number of difficult riddles. The general was the first to pay her a visit, and she, wishing to test him, ordered him around, sending him up and down stairs, and then demanding a foot massage. He, wishing to please her, did all that she asked. Seeing that was not of firm character and was thus unsuitable to be king, she kicked him in the chest and sent him away. Several other suitors were similarly shamed. Nobody, it seemed, could please the princess. Nor could anybody solve the riddles set by the dying king.

Eventually a decision was made to send out the magical state chariot, which, with no driver, would identify a suitable king. The chariot set off swiftly, headed straight to the park in which Janaka lay, and stopped alongside him. Here, they realised, was a man suitable to rule the kingdom, and so they invited him to the palace. Once there, Janaka proceeded to solve all the riddles. He also pleased Princess Sivali, by refusing to obey her demands. He was crowned king, married Sivali, and sent for his mother to come and live with them.

Janaka and Sivali had a son, and for many years they ruled happily. One day, Janaka decided to spend some time in his park. At the entrance to the park were two mango trees, one of which was heavy with ripe fruit, and the other bare of fruit but dark with lustrous green foliage. He picked a mango and ate it, then entered the park for his day's sport. On his way out that evening, he saw that the tree he had eaten from had been stripped of all its fruit, and stood bare, with broken branches. He asked what had happened, and was told that the people had seen the king eat the first fruit, and therefore assumed they were now entitled to eat of it too. The mango tree was truly sorry-looking, especially next to the fruitless but lush and strong and healthy tree that stood beside it. Looking at these two trees, it occurred to Janaka that being king was like being the fruiting tree, while being a renouncer was like

being the fruitless tree: “It is the people with possessions who suffer. I will renounce and become a recluse,” he reflected.

But in deciding to become a renouncer Janaka had not counted on the opposition of his wife Sivali. She, refusing to accept his decision, followed him as he made his way out of the city wearing his ascetic robes and carrying a begging bowl. She had people light big fires around the city and then told him, “Look, King Janaka! Mithila is in flames! You must protect your city and your people!” He replied with a verse that has become famous throughout the world:

> “We are so happy, we who have no possessions!
> Though Mithila may be on fire, nothing of mine is burning!”

Sivali continued to follow him as he approached a town. Outside the town was a young girl playing in the sand. On one of her wrists she had two bracelets, which jangled noisily as she played. On the other was a single bracelet, which remained silent. Again, Janaka saw the benefits of solitude, and tried to make his wife understand, but she would not. Janaka entered the town, and there he saw a fletcher checking the straightness of his arrows. He would shut one eye and look down the shaft to check for any flaws. Again, Janaka asked his wife to acknowledge the benefits of being alone.

Eventually Janaka picked a piece of grass from the side of the road and showed it to his wife, saying, “Just as it is not possible to re-join this to its clump, so it is not possible for me to re-join you.” At this Sivali fainted on the ground in grief, and, seeing his opportunity, Janaka slipped off into the forest, never to be seen again.

When Sivali came round, she saw that she would never get her husband back. Installing their son on the throne, she herself took up residence in the park as a renouncer, and practised meditation. Both she and her husband attained a heavenly rebirth.

The Buddha explained, “At that time my wife was Sivali, and I was Janaka.”